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ABSTRACT

Much attention has been given to the physical ramifications of early sexual activity, but little has been said about emotional and psychological repercussions. The breakdown of the American family may be a contributing factor in causing premature sexual activity, along with the strong adolescent sex drive, the fear of loneliness and the media. An immediate consequence of premature sexual activity is the hurt stemming from a broken relationship. Following the breakup of a relationship, teenage girls can have problems with interpersonal commitment. Communication and trust may suffer in a sexually-based relationship and one's reputation may be harmed. Career and education plans, as well as health, can be altered when teenagers become sexually active. Teenagers who avoid sex can explore other avenues of involvement and can have the satisfaction of being in control. Teenage girls who engage in sexual activity run the risk of becoming pregnant and choosing between abortion or having the baby. Girls who choose abortion may experience a delayed negative reaction to the abortion, known as Post-Abortion Syndrome. Teenagers who opt to keep their baby often have trouble staying in school, completing their education, and finding employment. Teenagers who choose to delay sexual gratification may avoid pain and enhance their prospects of achieving happiness in life. (NB)

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TEENAGE SEXUALITY: WHAT ARE THE EMOTIONAL EFFECTS?

[Bebe C. Kennedy]

Abstract

The emotional effects of teenage sexual activity are examined. Awareness of the various adverse psychological consequences of teen sex is necessary for the professional helper in working with adolescents. Premature sexual behavior can block teenagers from developing their full potential, and avoidance of sex by teenagers can have positive consequences.

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Much attention has been given to the ramifications of early sexual activity - pregnancy, venereal disease, AIDS, and genital disorders - but very little has been said about emotional and psychological repercussions. "The high probability of emotional scars, guilt, confusion about self and others... make sexual activity a high-risk proposition for both boys and girls" (Search Institute SOURCE, 1985, p.2).

Less than two generations ago, early teenage sexual behavior was not deemed to be a predominant societal problem. But today, teens are making decisions to be sexually active, and these decisions can have far-flung emotional consequences. "In addition, the decision will always affect the girl. If she engages in premarital sex, has a baby, or has an abortion, all of these results will affect how society regards her and will change the way she regards herself" (Franz, 1987).

The breakdown of the American family is thought to be a primary contributing factor in causing premature sexual activity. The love famine experienced by many teens provokes them into searching for affection and attention outside the family. Parents are beset by many distractions and by the complexity of modern life but need to be aware of the fact that their example has a major effect. Recognizing the primary influence of parents, the Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Programs (OAPP), under the auspices of the Department of Health and Human Services emphasizes the importance of family involvement. The program seeks to incorporate the family in a partnership directed toward

prevention of adolescent pregnancy, and in the event of pregnancy, reduction of its ensuing problems. OAPP also provides programs promoting abstinence among unmarried females (Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Programs, 1990).

In a study of 14- to 16-year old teenagers, it was noted that 47 percent of the boys and 65 percent of the girls responded that they engaged in sexual activities even though they did not desire to do so (Hass, 1981). A study of 1,006 teenage girls revealed that 24 percent often felt pressured into participating in sexual behavior because of not knowing how to say no (Nonkin, 1982). In addition, they may engage in sexual activity to gain acceptance in their social groups. Bloom (1987) stated that every single obstacle to sexual relationships between young unmarried persons has disappeared and that these relationships have become routine. A very nice, very normal young woman stated "Because it's no big deal." That says it all, according to Bloom.

The strong adolescent sex drive and the fear of loneliness make it difficult for teens to resist the temptation to use another person sexually. Loneliness is one of the biggest problems of adolescents, and the effort to break away from it is a major cause for girls' becoming sexually involved. She gives him sex and he gives her companionship, but they both find that the exploitation leads to unhappiness (The Foundation for the Family, 1987). Compounding the situation is the limitation a sexual

relationship can impose on the opportunity to develop friendships. Both become possessive of the other's time and thus suppress the freedom to seek other social relationships which are essential to adolescent development.

The media also contributes to teens' preoccupation with sexual matters. Movies and television have themes that cause sexual arousal, and this may cause difficulty for adolescents in contending with their sexuality.

A frequently immediate consequence of premature sexual activity is the hurt stemming from a broken relationship. It is apparent that pregnancy is a factor in terminating relationships, as "more than 85 percent of all boys who impregnate teenage girls will eventually abandon them" (Gordon, 1983-84, p.2). This can lead to the pregnant girl's feeling that she has been used, an emotionally painful consequence.

Adolescent girls often become pregnant after going on a contraceptive. From the service centers that keep statistics on contraceptive use, there are consistent figures: From one third to one half of the cases are young women who have become pregnant after initiating contraceptive use (Vandegaer, 1983). Young women ask themselves some nagging questions. "Does my boyfriend really love me? Am I only a sex object to him?" In the mind of the teenager, a baby certainly would clarify the relationship. While there are other factors involved, the doubts about the relationship cannot be minimized.

Usually, the relationships are terminated, and broken

relationships have consequences. These teenage girls can have problems with interpersonal commitment because of their negative experience. Those with one or more broken relationships may build up defenses against being hurt again and protect themselves by becoming involved with multiple sexual partners, by being uncommitted, or by living with a man, unmarried (Vandegaer, 1983).

Communication is the first casualty of a sexually based relationship, and the next human link to fall is trust, as neither partner believes the other is in control of physical desires (McDowell and Day, 1987). A further consequence may be loss of reputation. Even though the double standard for sexual behavior is condemned, it exists, and it is more difficult for the girl to regain a lost reputation than for the boy. A damaged reputation can affect what kind of individual the teenager marries. Furthermore, career and education plans, as well as health can be altered drastically when teens become sexually active prematurely (The Foundation for the Family, 1987).

> People talk. Boys talk. Girls talk. The boy who plays the role of the stud will soon wear the label. The girl who sleeps around will become known for that. The couple who tell themselves, "This is just between us" almost always break up, and then they tell. (The Foundation for the Family, 198

Teens who avoid sex can explore other avenues of involvement and seek friends in their school, church, and community. Those engaged in sexual activity tend to turn inward and think about their own needs and wants, while those who are not so occupied

are free to be more helpful to others. For those not burdened by sexually driven relationships, there is no necessity to maintain a sophisticated image; instead, there is freedom to reach out and to become involved with the needs of others.

> Many teens are preoccupied with themselves not so much because of self-love, but because of a basic need for self-preservation. Their problems limit their freedom to love others. They simply cannot take their eyes off their own problems. They are unable to concern themselves with the needs of others because of the magnitude of their own problems. The cause of their self-centeredness is often painful self-hurt, not just self-love. (McDowell & Day, 1987, p.30

Teenagers who decide not to engage in sexual activity have the satisfaction of being in control. Teens need to ask themselves, "Am I choosing my own way, or am I just going along with the crowd?" Each time they make the decision to stay in control of their bodies, they strengthen themselves for the next decision (Womanity, 1979). Those who submit do not enjoy the same freedom. They have lost control, and this can result in diminished self-esteem.

True sexual freedom doesn't come easily. It requires the ability to say "No" to peer pressure. If teenagers lose self-control, there is a possible corresponding loss of freedom to plan their future. Socially transmitted diseases and pregnancy can unalterably change the course of lives.

The United States has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates of

industrialized nations. For those who become pregnant, there are two possible routes: abortion or carrying the child to term. There is a difference of opinion among therapists about the effects of abortion, some believing that there is no effect, others perceiving great stress, still others claiming that every abortion produces trauma. Reardon (1987) undertook a study of 230 women who had abortions. Forty-six percent of his subjects were 15-19 years of age at the time of their abortion. Over 93 percent of those in his study stated that their abortions resulted in severely diminished self-image. Nineteen percent described themselves as engaging in "suicidal" behavior; 10 percent reported becoming alcoholic and another 10 percent reported turning to drugs; 5 percent stated they engaged in child abuse or child neglect. Among the miscellaneous reactions reported were insomnia, nightmares, fear of touching babies, constant thought about the aborted child, unforgiveness of self, bitterness, loneliness, and promiscuity. Sixty-six percent of these women believe their lives today are worse because of their abortions. Rue (1986) stated that the 70 percent failure rate of unmarried relationships following abortion is evidence of the trauma.

Many of those who undergo abortion initially feel a sense of relief. But within recent years, professionals who counsel women who have had abortions are observing a delayed reaction to the event known as Post-Abortion Syndrome (PAS), not unlike the response some veterans experience years following combat duty. Among the therapeutic hallmarks associated with PAS are denial,

hostility, depression, guilt, and a feeling of being victimized. Two of the factors considered in the reconciliation of these women are acknowledgement of the grief process and forgiveness (Rue, 1986).

On the other hand, more than one-half of teen pregnancies lead to birth, and the overwhelming majority of teens elect to keep their children. What happens to the teenage parent? According to Search Institute SOURCE (1985), the psychological toll is pervasive.

> Compared with their peers teenage mothers are less likely to complete school, are more likely to be employed in low paying jobs, and are more likely to be dependent on welfare... Teenage parenthood is associated with higher rates of marital separation and divorce, not only for the first marriage, which may have been precipitated by the teenage pregnancy, but for second marriages as well. (Search Institute SOURCE, 1985, p. 1.)

The consequences are variable, being less severe for some teenagers than for others.

Regardless of what the outcome might be for teens who engage in early sexual activity, whether it be adverse emotional/physical consequences, parenthood, or abortion, there is a heavy price to pay. Teenagers who make the choice to delay sexual gratification may avoid pain and greatly enhance their prospects of achieving happiness in life.

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